

The University of Chicago

THE RELIGIOUS
EXPERIENCE OF THE CORINTHIANS
IN PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN
TIMES

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

1937

By
KENNETH C. BECHTEL

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The purpose of this study is to consider religious experience as that which grows out of and is conditioned by specific heritages, concrete environments and personal reactions. The locale is the city of Corinth, its two ports Cenchreae and Lechaenum and the Isthmian center of worship near the city.¹ The time is the first decade of the second half of the first century A.D. The nature of the study is the consideration of religious acts rather than doctrinal formulation. For a definite period of time, that in which the Christian religion was a becoming religion, the attempt is made to present just one picture of the many possible ones of the on-going vital religious experience of the day. Since the experience of religion cannot be viewed apart from the political, economic and social life, considerable emphasis is placed on the politico-social history of the Corinthian community.

Consequently then in the consideration of the history of the community of Corinth we mean not only the political, but the economic-social and literary aspects as well. Also, more emphasis will be placed on the history of the community after B.C. 46 when the city was rebuilt by Julius Caesar than on the previous period of its existence.

A brief treatment of the general history of Corinth is in place as we study the religious experience of this community. Pre-historically as well as historically we have the mixture of races. When the northern Aryans invaded the Peloponnese they found a so-called aboriginal population there. The primitive history of Corinth is legendary. Her recorded history begins c. 750 B.C. when the famous clan of the Bacchiadae established an oligarchical régime. In c. 657 B.C. this oligarchy was overthrown by Cypselus who exercised a tyranny from 655 to 625. From this time until the

¹The sources for the study of other centers are more abundant in certain instances, but we find valuable ones for our study in archaeology, Strabo, Pausanias and Paul.

fifth century B.C. the aristocratic party was in control. During the rule of Cypselus we find a prosperous and peaceful period for Corinth. Colonies were established along the Ionian sea. The son of Cypselus, Periander who ruled until 585 B.C. was the most celebrated of all the tyrants of ancient Greece. In the seventh and sixth centuries, during and after the domination of the Cypselides, Corinth arrived at the apogee of her prosperity only to reach again such heights during the early Roman empire. At this time she was probably the richest city in continental Greece. To the ingenious Corinthians was attributed the invention of the trireme. She was inventive in art. The city was outstanding in commerce and manufactures. Numerous colonies were founded. The population in the city and colonies numbered in the neighborhood of 300,000 citizens and 500,000 slaves.

Enriched by commerce the Corinthians remained moderate and pacific. As allies of Sparta they tempered her warlike spirit. They acted as arbiters in disputes between the city states of Greece. Because of its central location the city was often selected as a meeting place of the pan-Hellenic congress. Corinth took her place with the rest of the Greeks in the Persian war.

Corinth became jealous when Athens desired the maritime supremacy and in 461 B.C. declared war on her. After the city had been seriously threatened by the enemy peace was declared. There followed some trouble with Sparta, and some years later when Athens intervened in a quarrel between Corinth and her colony Corcyra we have the Peloponnesian war. Although Corinth was on the winning side at the end of this war she reaped little advantage. Sparta had established a veritable maritime despotism.

The democratic party now took control of affairs. There was continuous trouble with Sparta until 391 B.C. when the western port of Corinth was captured and the long walls between it and the city were razed. Peace was declared after which she joined a league with Athens and Sparta against Thebes. Later (366 B.C.) she was again on friendly terms with Thebes. Corinth now took an active part in the internal affairs of Syracuse.

She constituted the meeting place of the congress which elected Philip king of Macedonia head of the Hellenic confederation in 339 B.C. The same powers were given to Alexander two years later. In the wars which followed she lost her liberty. The princes who were contending for Greece had great need to place a

garrison on Acrocorinthus. In 243 B.C. the Macedonian garrison was put to flight and Corinth became a member of the Achaean league in which she remained the chief center until her destruction at the hands of Romans under the general Mummius in 146 B.C.²

The city was razed and there was a state of desolation for a century after which in 46 B.C. it was refounded by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony under the title Colonia Julia Corinthus. This was a Roman-burgess community. It was an important political and commercial center under Rome, but at a moment when Rome was off her guard, the waves of destruction, the pirates of the north (third century A.D.), beat down upon the metropolis. Again she raised her head. Then came Alaric the conqueror in 396. In the eighth century the Slavs devastated it. After it had existed under various powers (Turks, Vanetians and others) the ancient city finally crumbled at the time of the earthquake early in 1858.

Corinth, at the period in which we are interested was a large and prosperous city. Her population was probably more than half a million the majority of which were slaves. The territorial extent of the new city has not been definitely determined but it must have been somewhat near that of the old city which was about four and one-half miles in circumference. It was not a seaport but was situated some few miles inland from its two ports; about eight miles from Cenchreae to the east and about one and one-third miles from Lechaeum to the west, with the imposing Acrocorinthus to the south. It was situated about seven miles from the sacred precinct of Poseidon on the Isthmus. The city faced the north-east. It was abundantly supplied with water and baths. From many points of view the location was ideal.

It was a great wholesale distributing point. We may say of Corinth that she was a thriving commercial center with her continuous transfer of goods, great banking institutions, in-coming and out-going vehicles of transportation, exchange centers, warehouses and prevailing commercial atmosphere.³ Business men of the

²Cf. The Histories of Polybius, xxxix. 13. Translated by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889); The Geography of Strabo (The Loeb Classical Library), 8. 6. 23 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917-32). Pausanias also refers to this event.

³For a suggestion of a reconstruction of the commercial-economic and religious life of Corinth in which Paul planted his

day were drawn here. There was no doubt a conglomerate group of traders, shop-keepers, ship-owners, storehouse-owners and bankers which composed the business stratum of the city. Corinth was no doubt crowded by those engaged in the distribution of goods. Here was a center of shipping supplies of every description. Here the sailing craft would be repaired. Shops were scattered profusely throughout the city. A necessary corollary of the fact that we find in Corinth a thriving commercial center is the undoubted concentration of wealth in the city.

The social life of Corinth was extremely varied. Here were Greeks, Romans, Jews, other orientals and stragglers from the fringes of the civilized world. Although an undoubted experience of individualism and cosmopolitanism was prevalent, yet several strata of social life are clearly discernable which the social texture of ancient civilization made inevitable. The following groups may confidently be listed: the political-official group; the wealthy traders, bankers and brokers;⁴ the financially-crushed group; the middle economic group; slaves; professional people;⁵ and visitors. There were no doubt many other groups which one might designate.

If we turn to the matter of social living we have the following categories: politics; business and economics; manufacture and craftwork; labor; the housing, feeding and clothing of the city's population; painting, architecture and sculpture; education;⁶ the professions;⁷ domestic life; play and entertainment;⁸

brand of Christianity compare the description of Delos in The Cambridge Ancient History, VIII: 642 ff. While Corinth lay in ruins the commercial center shifted to Delos, but later shifted to Rome and Corinth.

⁴The remains of the rather magnificent Corinthian villa discovered by Dr. T. L. Shear is evidence for this group.

⁵Physicians, philosophers and advocates.

⁶The normal education of the day was in progress.

⁷Includes writing.

⁸Here we note particularly the Isthmian games. Interest in the athletic and other Greek contests seems to have waned and more coarse elements of Roman entertainment seem to have appeared. The Isthmian games were gradually expanded to include a Roman coloring. Mention should also be made of the amphitheatre and theatre as means of entertainment.

clubs; and religion.⁹

Some general considerations in regard to our study of religious experience in Corinth in A.D. 50 may profitably be considered before the treatment of the more specific types of religion and specific divinities which is to follow.

As to sources, the main ones from the literary standpoint (Strabo and Pausanias) are either too late or too early for our purpose.¹⁰ The archaeologist has unearthed inscriptions and other material which is of great value to the student of religion. There are also a considerable number of valuable references in contemporary literature as well as those already mentioned. Some valuable studies both recent and earlier are at the hands of the student. The thoroughness of the destruction of the city and the refounding of the city with its subsequent development are important items for the understanding of the religious experience of the community's people.¹¹

We need to consider the nature of the Greeks, Romans and other ethnic groups concerned, and some general observations on the nature of religion in the ancient world are important. Religion was connected with almost everything. There were a great variety and number of visible objects of worship. The Romans were rather tolerant of the different religions of the time. Vital religion in the middle of the first century was individualistic in its approach. The union of church and state was a significant item of some of the religions of this time. Religion tended to be conservative. We need to keep in mind that none of us to-day can fully understand the religious life of that day. A matter of general concern and one to aid in the approach of our study is the conception of private and public religious experience. An outstanding phenomenon which one observes as he reads the pages of ancient history is that of temple treasures. The various classes of divinities in the ancient world should be kept in mind. Other-

⁹Especially formal religion.

¹⁰Strabo is too early by about a third of a century, and Pausanias wrote about a century and a quarter later.

¹¹If founded by Roman tribes a hundred years before the time in which we are interested, how Greek was it? How much of what Pausanias saw was made since the destruction and re-settlement of the city and when? Such questions as these are pertinent.

worldliness in religion was not uncommon in that day. We need to keep before us the distinction between religion and magic as well as that between religion and ethics. The distinction between religion and mythology needs to be kept in mind. There were the significant attitudes of awe, superstition and reverence toward that which was religious. There was a fusion of religions out of which some great ones were bidding for attention.¹²

As we keep in mind the existence of this general religious situation which prevailed in the Corinthian community we also need to remember that the religious life of this locale as of any other specific place must be viewed in consideration of the uniqueness of the location in relation to the general situation. No two communities like no two individuals are alike. In the treatment of this specific religious situation evidence is found for the following groups of religious influence: the formal Graeco-Roman religions;¹³ aboriginal and local cults;¹⁴ hero and healing cults;¹⁵

¹²Mithraism from the east; the religion of the Great Mother from Asia Minor; the Isis religion from Egypt; and the Greek Dyonysiac-Orphic, Eleusinian and Pythagorean Mysteries.

¹³The Greek Olympian religions and the old Roman state religion. The following divinities were influential: Poseidon (the Isthmian divinity), Apollo, Amphitrite, Artemis (Ephesian Artemis and Taurian Artemis both mentioned), Athena, Hermes, Zeus and Cyclopes. Little evidence is at hand for the possible existence of the older Roman state gods at Corinth.

¹⁴By aboriginal is meant those of vital significance when the Aryan invaders came from the North, and also cults based on fundamental and universal human needs. Aboriginal divinities were those of the homes (Roman divinities), Calm, Palaemon, Ino, Leucothea, Melicertes (later known as Palaemon), Sea, Tritons, Ilithyia, Eros, Aphrodite, Fates, Necessity and Force, Helios, Phaëthon, the Muses and probably others. Of local religious influence were the myths about Sisyphus, Glaukos, Bellerophon and Pegasus, Medea's children Mermerius and Pheres, the fountain of Peirene and the courtesan Lais.

¹⁵These are listed together since both largely emphasize the human element and service to struggling and suffering humanity. Heroes are Heracles, the Dioscuri, Bellerophon and Sisyphus (already mentioned) and successful athletes. Healing divinities are Asclepius, Health, Apollo and others such as Isis and Artemis. The influence of the cult of Asclepius at Epidauros which was near must have been great. There were no doubt many healing divinities.

the Greek Mysteries;¹⁶ the Oriental Mysteries;¹⁷ Judaism;¹⁸ the Philosophies;¹⁹ Roman Emperor Worship;²⁰ peripheral and other religions;²¹ and the four great particular religions of first-century Corinth, Poseidon, Aphrodite, Apollo and Dionysus.

What can we say of the materials and places of worship which functioned in the Corinthian community? The sacred precinct is commonly mentioned in the sources. The most common place of worship was quite likely the temple although there were other types of sacred places which were no doubt in use. There were various kinds of temples, and there were various accessories which belonged to the temple. Undoubtedly the central part of the temple was the altar. Images were extremely numerous in this day. One found them at every turn. The decorations of the temples and other buildings were not without a religious significance. There were various sacred objects in the religious life of these people.

As we note the religious act our thoughts go first to the practice of sacrifice which perhaps constituted the chief religious act of the time when the cult of Jesus emerges. The burning of incense and the offering of prayers were effective religious acts. Processions and initiations together with pomp and ceremony possessed a strong religious appeal. Feasts as well as fasts were religious acts, as were also music and dancing. Prophecy as well

¹⁶The mysteries were the most effective religions of this period. Although the Greek and Oriental mystery religions receive mention we do well to remember that there were other mysteries which probably found devotees in the great city. Greek Mysteries were the Eleusinian, Dionysus and the Orphic brotherhoods and probably the Pythagorean.

¹⁷Isis and the Great Mother. It is a striking fact that Mithraism seems to have never gained a foothold in Greece.

¹⁸Diaspora Judaism functioned.

¹⁹Some should be included in the study of religious experience. The Cynic-Stoic preachers and the Pythagoreans no doubt figured to some extent.

²⁰This worship prevailed with a Greek flavor. We find it in connection with Apollo and the Muses.

²¹Examples are those of the Africans, Gauls, Parthians, Germans, Britains, etc. Astrology should also be mentioned. Roman divinities particularly the abstract ones Concordia, Nemesis, Victoria, Lares Augusti and Providentia should be included in this category.

as preaching played a great part in the religious life of the people of this day. Priests and priestesses were common functionaries in religious systems. The sacramental experience was a potent one. There were set times for religious practice. One of the most powerful means of expressing the religious life was found in the various games common in that day. Omens and their interpretation were popular particularly among the Romans. Various practices are observable if one considers the nature of religious experience.²² We may think of the nature of religious action in terms of private, semi-private²³ and public religious experience. We may think of various types of religious actions such as those which were orgiastic, Roman stately worship, the esoteric Jewish cult, such a religion as Isis which was open to all races and both sexes and some cults as that of the emperor which were strongly political. The types of religious experience were as varied as the types of individual and social experiences of the people. One is impressed by the costliness, and to us waste, observable in the religious systems of that day. It is a striking fact and one not easy to keep before us that one individual might belong to various religions at one time.

As we consider the function of religion in that day perhaps the fact of their non-scientific world view should be the first matter to receive attention. Then again, it is our contention that religion in any situation is determined by social experience. Religion arises out of the inadequacy which man feels in his social experiences. Religious experience must give satisfaction to the people as they live in their social situations, and this satisfaction was found primarily by the Corinthians in the individualistic appeal of the religions about them. According to our view wishes for response, recognition, participation and security lie back of religious experience. In prosperous first-century Corinth generally speaking the wishes for response, recognition and participation would be stronger than the wish for security.

²² There were various religious groups such as ethnic groups, high-god worshippers, hero worshippers, followers of the mysteries, etc.

²³ By this term is meant the application of religion to everyday life in an informal way. Examples are: the business man would pray to Hermes for success, the sailor and trader would pray to Poseidon or Serapis, etc. Private religious experience is considered as that which was connected with home life.

Religion gave security in regard to that which was marvelous. It was connected with the mystery of life. It assured security in the future life. People found help in religion for the struggles and pains of life. Strength for the daily battles was found in religion. The prophets foretold future events to give security to people. Religion was sought in regard to war and other matters of statecraft. The fusion of religions in the Graeco-Roman world amply satisfied the complexity of human nature. There was conservatism, intellectualism, ceremonialism and emotionalism.

Into the social and religious situation which has been set forth in this study, the cult of Jesus made its appearance sometime during the second third of the first century. It was very probably introduced before the coming of Paul although he was undoubtedly the first to introduce the cult to the group with which he labored.²⁴

Paul came to the Corinthians as a servant and messenger. It is possible to get a fair idea of the primitive message²⁵ which he preached to the Corinthian group. It was evidently simple. It was the "good news." He spoke of the sacrament of the bread and the wine-cup. The death, resurrection and resurrection appearances of Jesus were proclaimed. His spiritism was probably connected with his message. He emphasized apocalypticism and regeneration as well as union with Jesus in his death and resurrection. Jewish sacred literature was used in his message, and one might also say that it constituted a part of his method. Perhaps the matter of the kingdom of God was emphasized. Monotheism may have received slight emphasis. Faith was no doubt early emphasized. Love may have received some consideration in the early message of Paul to the Corinthians, and he no doubt emphasized that Jesus was Lord and Messiah in his first preaching.

What can we say of action during these early days? Paul evidently was an unsupported preacher. He was a hard worker. He adapted his procedure to fit all classes and types of individuals. His method of the propagation of his message was that of preaching. He preached with power rather than in careful expressions.

²⁴Cf. I Cor. 3: 10. They were his product (I Cor. 9: 1-2). Paul's affection for this group was extraordinary.

²⁵Cf. I Cor. 11: 23 ff; 15: 1 ff.

Baptism was a common practice. He undoubtedly was responsible for a number of powerful acts. Some of the spiritual gifts enumerated in I Cor., chapter 12, were no doubt first of all performed by him.

Evidently the early cult group met together for inspiration, worship and communion. The place was no doubt in the home of some member. Women as well as men helped to make up the group of worshippers. The meetings were simple in nature. In the early meetings there were probably religious greetings and farewells, the practice of the holy kiss, enthusiastic response, singing, prophecy and other charismata, prayer, preaching, testimonies and the experience of the communion. There were some early converts, and during this early period Paul no doubt had some valuable helpers as well as probably soon some opponents.

It is difficult to surmise just how much the ethical and other problems so evident from the correspondence of Paul came to the fore during the early days. The assumption is that they were not taken with any seriousness until near the time of Paul's correspondence with the group to which time we now direct our attention.

In the face of new social experiences there is religious adjustment. So it was with this early Christian group. Their religious heritage, their daily social experience and the new religion which Paul brought, all must be adjusted. We see this group living in the midst of their problems of socio-religious adjustment. For a few years now they have been members of a new cult. In the midst of a vital religious experience they are struggling along; meeting the problems which this experience brings.²⁶

There was considerable in common between Paul's religion which he introduced and the religious situation common at Corinth. However we find that in this situation primitive Christian adjustment was necessary. In our consideration of this matter we need to keep in mind the great influence of the leader of such a group as this as well as their religious heritage and a very influential extraneous religious life about them. This adjustment centers about the following items: factions, immorality, litigation,

²⁶In this matter of religious adjustment we need to keep in mind the proper meaning of environment. Environment is that to which a person reacts actively.

marriage, contact with other religions, women in worship, festival disorders and the use of charismata. In several of these instances we note that Paul's sense of security is disturbed.²⁷ In a few instances the security of the group seems to have been shaken.²⁸ The advice of Paul was probably not taken seriously in most instances.²⁹

As we see the cult of Jesus adjusting itself to its environment as well as heredity in the Corinthian community the picture is more or less one of chaos. Emotion runs high in their meetings. Factions manifest themselves. The new movement has no stable organization. It is a becoming religion among the more firmly established religions of the Graeco-Roman world.³⁰ The young struggling cult is spiritistic, being so colored by its leader. The function of both the intellect and emotions is charismatical. It is individualistic and in this characteristic lies its virtue. It is a new religion. It is composed of various elements taken over from its religious heritage and its present environment. Its mythology and concepts as well as practices are set in the world view of that time.

The totality of the religious life which includes the influence of Christianity on the life about it as well as the influence of that life on Christianity during the period under consideration should be kept in mind. The total religious situation is envisaged with the mutual influence of the cult of Jesus and other religions. We see a continuing religious experience during this period in the Corinthian community. Syncretism and progress

²⁷So especially in regard to factions, litigation, marriage, contact with other religions, women in worship, festival disorders and the use of charismata.

²⁸Especially in regard to marriage and the use of charismata.

²⁹In regard to factions the violence of the situation was lessened. As to immorality, litigation, marriage, contact with other religions and women in worship Paul's advice would not have much weight. It would be rather influential in regard to festival disorders and the use of charismata. In every instance in which Paul saw fit to make an adjustment save in that of the problem of charismata it was his Jewishness that prompted the objection.

³⁰For a concise statement depicting the primitive Pauline religious groups see S. J. Case, The Social Origins of Christianity (Chicago, 1923), p. 159.

go on. The religious situation is ever changing. The picture from the time when Christianity entered the city to the passing of Paul has changed. Out of the social experience, the religious heritage and the ideals of men, religion continued to emerge and function in the experience of the people of that day.

